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### **Free Trade Helps Alabama**

With a new trade pact pending in Congress, the mystery is why scary myths persist about free trade.

Yet the Central American Free Trade Agreement faces an uphill battle on Capitol Hill. For reasons both specific to this agreement and generic to most free trade accords anywhere, Congress ought to stop fiddling and pass this pact as soon as possible.

Despite all the gnashing of teeth about the North American Free Trade Agreement and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade in the 1990s, the facts overwhelmingly show that both of those accords have worked well.

It was no accident that the sustained growth of the mid and late 1990s, and the historic shallowness of the recession of 2001, followed the approval of NAFTA and GATT. By removing taxes on both imports and exports, free-trade pacts encourage investment, employment and lower prices.

Funny, isn't it, that for all the job losses supposedly attributable to NAFTA, the underlying economy became so strong that the national unemployment rate even after 9/11 never got worse than the best rate in previous economic "booms"?

As for the pact at issue today, known as CAFTA, it should be particularly helpful to the United States and to Alabama. Most of the Central American products that enter the United States already do so tax-free, but most U.S. products going the other way are taxed heavily. CAFTA will eliminate that imbalance, with half of American agricultural products going to Central America becoming tax free upon the pact's approval.

U.S. Agriculture secretaries under presidents Carter, Reagan, Clinton and both Bushes all have endorsed the agreement.

The fact that it is American agriculture that is expected to benefit should particularly encourage Alabamians to support the pact. Alabama farms, shipping their produce through the port of Mobile, should fare quite well under CAFTA. The port itself will obviously benefit, too.

CAFTA is a good deal for the state and nation. Alabama's congressmen, in particular, should lead the way in helping it pass.